

# THE QUARRY

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Deda's Secret

It was so cold out that Eli's bones ached. A fierce wind rushed through the laneway and flattened his parka against his back. Lowering his head to buffer the gust, he dug his small hands deeper into his jacket pockets and trudged onwards through the cobbled laneway, steadily drawing away from his cosy row home and closer to the marketplace where he was to meet his Deda. Clumps of snow clung to the edges of the stone path; the middle was a shallow mess of sludge and dirt, making his journey treacherous. He slipped on a patch of black ice and threw his hands out to his sides to stay on his feet. 'Woah!' He kept on, lowering his face even further from the wind that gusted off the Vltava River as he got further from his small, but cosy home and closer to the city centre where he was meeting Deda at the marketplace. Miss

Zvonicek had told his class that in the United States they call Chicago the ‘Windy City’. He thought maybe they hadn’t been to Prague in the winter; some days the wind was so strong he felt like it was going to blow the city right off the map.

Eli had his entire life savings—225 koruna—in the zipped inside pocket of his red parka. He stopped every few minutes to check that it was all still there. It had taken him a whole year to save up this much money; he hadn’t spent any of his birthday money and he was always trying to figure out how he could earn more. He often helped his neighbours by chopping and carrying in their firewood and Mrs Herink paid him five koruna each week. It wasn’t much, but it was all they could give. Sometimes money was too tight and they would offer a weak smile and a few logs to take to his mother, or a quarter of a bag of potatoes. He always said ‘thank you’, but he hated it when they paid him with potatoes. They were often soft with green parts and had weird bits growing out of them. Mostly he threw them away; Mum said not to bother bringing rotten vegetables home—they would only make everyone sick.

Deda always said that winter was for working and summer was for playing. He spent most of the days huddled in his small workshop at the back of his pre-war cottage sawing and chiselling blocks of oak into furniture to sell at the marketplace. That’s why Eli was headed there now, to help Deda sell his furniture. It was his first real job. Deda said he would give him *another* 225 koruna if he helped him sell his woodwork at the markets on Sundays. It wasn’t a job to be taken lightly. Eli was warned that it would be a very long day with a lot of standing up and little time for breaks. Some days, the worst days, snow fell quickly and the wind whipped up fierce and it was just horrible to be outside. On those days the marketplace was mostly deserted; there were never any customers to buy the furniture, which led to a boring, freezing day with no sales and no money. Deda and Eli both knew that the following week would be tough with hardly anything to eat and a low supply of firewood.

Eli stopped when a scrawny ginger cat holding a small silvery fish in its mouth sprang out of a doorway and slunk past him soundlessly. He glanced down at the red scratch marks on his right hand from his last encounter with a stray before he ran on past a large stack of wooden crates balanced at the end of the laneway. He jumped over the low stone fence and out into a bustling street at the edge of the Old Town. Deda had said that the best way to get to the market was to stay away from the

riverbanks and to cross over Charles Bridge, past the Astronomical clock, and into Old Town Square.

Eli had taken only a few steps onto the old bridge when he saw puffs of smoke coming from the direction of the marketplace. The hairs on his arms sprang up and he broke into a run, dodging a dawdling group of older ladies coming from the opposite direction. His pulse quickened and he rubbed his hands together. He turned his head over his right shoulder and called out to the ladies: ‘Did you see the fire?’

A round-faced lady wearing a red patterned headscarf turned to look at him. ‘Fire? What fire? There is no fire, boy.’

Eli pointed across Charles Bridge to where the smoke was thickening. ‘THAT FIRE!’

The five ladies turned and their eyebrows shot up. The shortest woman clasped both hands to her face and gasped, ‘Oh! It looks to be the marketplace.’

What? The marketplace? Eli sprinted the rest of the distance across the bridge. The Astronomical clock was nothing but a blur as he streaked along the cobbled streets. He passed an electronics store that had a wall of plasma screens showing the semi-final of the Czech Cup. He slowed just enough to get a glimpse of the score. Sparta Prague was up 2-1. Yes! He pumped his arms and picked up speed again. All he could think about was Deda and if he was okay; he wasn’t thinking about the cold or his life savings as he ran faster towards the Square. Suddenly, his left foot slipped on the ice and he skidded forward, losing traction. He waved his arms wildly to keep his balance, but it didn’t work. He fell heavily onto his knee, tearing a hole in his only pair of jeans and scraping a layer of skin off. He cried out, but there was no one around to hear. The pain shot through his leg and it swelled up immediately; a trail of blood ran down towards his shin. Eli kneeled there on all fours, stunned for a moment before he caught his breath and heaved himself into an upright position to inspect the wound. He brushed the snow off his knees and tried to run on towards the Square, but pain rushed into his knee and the best he could manage was an awkward limp. He had to get to Deda. He had to help him move the furniture.

The money in his pocket meant nothing anymore.

His knee ached and he stopped for a moment, hoping the pain would pass. It didn’t. Eli took a deep breath and hobbled on towards the marketplace. He covered

the distance as quickly as he could, but soon the smoke spread further and stung his eyes; breathing became harder and he choked back air that burned his throat. He limped on and his shoulders tensed when he saw several hefty men scurry across the Square with hoses and large white buckets of water. He wiped an arm across his brow, quickened his pace, and covered the fifty long meters to the marketplace, hobbling on his sore leg. When he reached the tents of the marketplace he stood on tippy toes to try and see where the flames were coming from, stretching his neck to see further. ‘DEDA! DEDA!’

No one answered.

At the back of the marketplace he saw that the flames had already devoured the end rows of trestle tables, scorching everything in their path. The blaze moved on and was licking the narrow legs of the next row of stalls. Deda’s furniture was directly in the path of the blaze and all he could do was watch. He turned and weaved through a line of ornate black lampposts that framed the outer stalls in the search for his grandfather. The knots in his stomach tightened when he couldn’t see any sign of Deda, or any hint of the other stall holders. *Where are the people?* The tables towards the front had been abandoned even though they had been prepped for sales, only today there were no sellers and buyers. Eli pushed past a pile of purple velvet and ran deeper into the marketplace calling out to his grandfather. ‘Deda! Deda! Where are you?’

Still no one answered.

He stood and looked all around at the chaos not knowing what to do. Determined flames licked hungrily at the tables and took hold, devouring every last morsel it touched. From behind him, he heard the sound of heavy boots stomping on the cobblestones. Two of the hefty men ran past struggling with a hose, the one wearing a reflective jacket yelled out to him. ‘Kush, Kush, little man. Get out of here before your tail catches fire!’

Eli’s heart raced in his small chest and the heat prevented him from staying within the markets. He limped backwards, not able to take his eyes from the flickering flames.

Eli watched a balding man run to the back stalls and signal to someone to turn the hose on. Water spewed out and onto the tables drenching everything that had been

burnt and ruining anything else that hadn't. Eli turned and hobbled out of the marketplace. Outside, the smoke enveloped him and his breath became raspy as stinging tears streamed down his cheeks. Eli wiped his eyes with his sleeve and was amazed to see Deda's little fluffy cat, Churchill, slink out from behind a garbage bin and sit on the kerb twitching his singed tail. He ran over to Churchill and hugged him close. The small cat miaowed and rubbed his head on his shoulder. He then frantically looked around him and felt the knot in his stomach tighten again. *Where is my Deda?* He couldn't see him anywhere. He was alone and he didn't know what to do.

A moment later, he heard heavy footsteps and, like a mirage through the smoke, Deda appeared and put a protective arm around his shoulders. 'Eli! There you are! Come now, come.'

Churchill jumped out of Eli's arms and ran straight to Deda, weaving in and out of his legs. Eli threw his arms around Deda's waist and held on to him as tight as he could and he felt the knot in his stomach disappear. They walked away from the marketplace and headed in the direction of home, but before they reached Charles Bridge Deda steered him off into a nearby pub. Eli looked over his shoulder to make sure that Churchill followed closely behind.

A beer and a glass of lemonade were placed on the bar and the two sat and drank in silence. After a time Eli spoke. 'Deda, where were you?'

'Eh? I was looking for you!'

Eli smiled weakly. 'So what will we do now? How will we buy food this week?'

The older man looked earnestly into his grandson's wide eyes and sighed deeply. 'We will manage with what we have. Times have been tougher than this.' Deda patted Eli's knee and continued, 'Not everything goes to plan, but we go on. We have to look past what has happened and live for what comes next.'

Eli sipped his lemonade and nodded. He felt hope that everything would be okay. The furniture was gone and Deda seemed to be alright about it. His shoulders slumped forward and he sighed deeply.

He glanced up when he noticed that Deda had swivelled in his seat and placed a rough hand on his knee, pointing to the flat screen television showing the Sparta game

where the score was 2-2. Eli nodded and gave a weak smile. He loved the football and he dreamed of going to watch a live game someday. That would be the best thing *ever*. But he knew that there was no way he would have enough money to go.

A huge cheer erupted from a group of merry men huddled around a small table. They were staring at a flat screen TV where the semi-final had just finished. Sparta Prague had won the game 3-2 by a last minute goal. One of the men jumped out of his seat and fist-pumped the air, beer flew from his upraised glass and landed in a splat onto the gaudy carpet while the others all laughed and clapped. Deda laughed along with them and winked at Eli.

‘See? All is good.’

Then he dug his hand into the inside pocket of his jacket, brought out a narrow white envelope and handed it to Eli, motioning for him to open it. Eli’s eyebrows lifted and he flicked a glance at Deda before he turned the envelope over and tore it open. He found a folded piece of paper inside, but he could feel that there was something else folded up with the letter. Eli looked up into Deda’s twinkling eyes and took a breath in. He looked back down at the letter and unfolded it quickly and gasped. In his hand he held two tickets to Letna Stadium. Oh wow! Eli’s eyes widened and he looked slowly up at Deda and then back to the tickets. His arms were covered in goose bumps and his mouth dropped open. How did he get these? Eli tried to speak, but no sound came out. Deda clapped a light hand on his back, lent in and kissed him on his forehead.

‘We are going to the final next Sunday. Stop worrying. Everything is good.’